
RETHINKING TOTEMISM AMONG THE URHOBO TRADITIONAL RELIGIONS AS A MEANS OF NATURE CARE

¹Isiorhovoja, Uyovwieyovwe Osbert, ²Banwune, E. D and ²Okobia F.N
¹Delta State University, Abraka and ²College of Education, Agbor

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of Totemism among the Urhobo Traditional religious as a means of promoting nature stewardship. It adopts a sociological interpretation of the phenomenon, using both structural and unstructured questionnaire to collect data for the study which is a major subject in traditional worship. The paper among other things discovered that nature care and stewardship which is a key player in environmental conservation is inherent in adherents. It also discovers that the religious practice if globally adopted, almost all species – plants and animals will be preserved through religious veneration as found among the people. This is further buttressed by the biblical practice carried out by Noah in his selection of plants and animals based on their kind prior the flood popularly known as operation Noah today. The paper concluded by recommending such practice to complement Government efforts in tree planting Campaign, cultivation of botanical gardens, wildlife and game reserve among other things.

KEYWORDS: Totemism, nature care, operation Noah, environmental conservation, ecology, Urhobo, stewardship.

INTRODUCTION

The paper examines totemism among the Urhobo as a vital practice of ensuring nature stewardship and environmental conservation. The Urhobo according to Eriwo (1991) inhabit the hinterland of the lower reaches of the Niger Delta, between longitude $5^{\circ} 30' 1''$ and $60^{\circ} 25' 1''$ East, and Latitude 6° and $5^{\circ} 15' 1''$ North in what is know as Delta State of Nigeria for their neighbors they have the Benin to the North, the Ijaw to the South, the Ukwani (in Aboh Division) to the East and the Itsekiri to the West. The Urhobo like other Africans, have always thought of God and his divine assignment to man in regard to his creation (Isiorhovoja, Okobia and Bubu 2011).

However, Eriwo (1991) notes that the geographical location had a remarkable effect on the general attitude to life and dictated their occupation ... had a decided influence on their religious outlook. This is corroborated by Ekeh (2005) on his discourse in the environmental context of Urhobo culture. He notes that these environmental features of numerous water bodies and tropical forest register powerfully in themes of Urhobo culture.

The Urhobo Reception of Totems

The general ideas about totems are centered on certain animals or plants which are venerated by the people. Ninian (1984) notes that totems are any animals plant object considered related to a kin group and view as sacred. This definition however brief conveys the idea of worship and veneration by a group. Hence Sigmund Freud (1056 – 35) argues that the basic idea conveyed in his work *Totems and Taboos* as quoted by Ninian (1989) affirms that: *It is the belief in and practice of a sacramental relationship with some animal species or other entities on the part of diverse segments of a group.*

Better elaborated, are the views shared by Arthur and Myers (1985), who opened that totems lent performance and stability to the clans, to the group of human individuals who generation after generation were each associated with a set of totems which distinguished one class from another.

Among the Urhobo as expressed in *The Handbook the World's Religion*, totem include: land creatures, water creatures, trees, plants or even natural phenomenon which are specially linked with gods and the individual or group. Their fortunes are interwoven with belief and symbolic rituals; and group survival depends on these links. They are hedged with taboos and leaned by symbolic performances.

Tonukari (2007) undertook a phenomenological study of sacred groves and tree worship among the Urhobo. He notes that the occurrence is not limited to the Urhobo alone, however, among the people the concept of the sacred trees, and other creatures and natural phenomenon, from the Urhobo historical past enters in the every facet of Urhobo traditional religion. It rests on the earliest conceptions of the unity of life in nature, in the sense of communion and fellowship with the divine center and source of life. The sanctity and essence of veneration of nature is deeply rooted in the earliest religious ideas of the initial Urhobo people to which, the Missionaries referred to as *Animism* as a result of their ignorance of the African culture.

Ray (1999) notes that the West as a result of their ignorance, used negative and derogatory terms in the 16th century to characterize African religions as fetishism . . . heathenism, totemism, magic and primitive religion a term Okot p'Bitek argued not African religions. Parrinder (1961) in like vein argues that the elements which were criticized in African Traditional Religions (ATR) like totemism and human sacrifice are not peculiar to earliest ATR alone; rather it is a global phenomenon. However, human sacrifices are gradually disappearing.

Mbiti (1991) defines animism as a system of belief and practices based on idea that objects and natural phenomena are inhabited by spirits or souls. While affirming this, he however did not admit the barbaric classification of the West which has reduced Africans to prehistoric and pagan concepts of God. The uniqueness of God's revelation which has often manifested in nature is greatly appreciated among the Urhobo. Tonukari (2007) affirms that in most parts of Urhoboland, each community had its own sacred grove and totems that cannot be regarded as paganism or barbaric as the people have had encounter(s) with. The religious activities built around such natural phenomenon, has witnessed the erection of altars among enormous age old trees, which were never to be cut down. On the other hand, it has led to the protection of plant species or groves on sacred grounds as well as animal which otherwise would have been destroyed or consumed as food since such area are not meant for hunting and games.

Onigu (1971) in what seems to be a summary of totems among the Urhobo states that, "it provides a solidarist front for the people." He went further to discuss Durkheim's comparative opinion of totems and flag and he submits that they were seen to possess unifying and solidarist elements for the people connected.
Traditional Religious and Nature Preservation

Today, many look forward to science and technology to solve one present ecological and environmental crises that it unfortunate because both science and technology have root in natural theology and the Christian dogma of man's rightful mastery over nature. Ehrlich and Ehrlich (1973) argue that:

erroneously, biblical texts are interpreted to support this wanton destruction of the natural environment, "possess the earth, rule and have dominion." The interpretation that suggests the destruction of the ecosystem falls short of other text which portrays the earth as God's true treasure.

The quest raised by the above authors clearly points to the relevance of nature worship as practiced among the Urhobo in having totems, grove and trees, lakes, rivers and other natural phenomena preserved and venerated.

The traditional Urhobo religions believe in spiritual and humanistic values as they are useful to man as he faces the challenges of endangering his own survival and well-being on earth. The natural environment as packaged by God is designed to give sustenance to man from generation to generation. The quest for development that is void of nature preservation will lead to destruction invariably.

An oral interviews conducted in course of this study recall that the concept of native care which is deeply enshrined in traditional religion has been greatly observed from one community to the other. In an interview with Madam Bibiana Osefiemure, she admits what God gives the water, fishes and other creatures in the river to show forth his glory therefore, they should be protected to retain that glory before him. She argues in vanacular "Ada gwogho asa na ejobi, ke uriri Oghene rho?" if the environment is destroyed, where then is the glory of God?

The knowledge of God permeates every strata of the society – Christians and non-Christians alike. Papa Ago Urhuogo attests to the knowledge of the Supreme Being while pointing to totems. He states that God (*Oghene*) sent them as his intermediaries among the people. Their presence are not to be challenged rather, they build up hope and a sense of constant protection; an edge walling round his own people.

The interview has 150 respondents. Absolute belief in totem as intermediary has 45 respondents representing 30%, the efficacy of Urhobo traditional religious practices has 21 respondents 14%, God is present in nature and should be worshipped and conserved has 28 respondents representing 18.7% . Traditional worship is experimental has 30 responding 20% while belief in environmental ecological restoration has 26% respondents representing 17.3% of the total population. These are expressions of belief in the subject of totemism and other practices association with nature care in Urhobo Traditional polity.

Relevance of Totems to the Contemporary Society

The argument posited by Onigu (2005) while laying emphasis on a particular Urhobo tribe, The Orogun polity which is applicable to all Urhobo notes that, totem is a symbol of what the people consider as sacred and in some sense, combines Durkheim's observation of sacredness and Radcliffe Brown's "object of ritual attitude" (1952).

The respect and acceptability for the totem as an intermediary is not based on kinship consideration only but also on the appreciation of the services rendered in the past to the individual or clan. Onigu (2005) captioned it as "a kind of savior-saved relationship that matures into a relation of kinship ... whereas it is nature clothed with socio-cultural elements." On the environment, Madam Oguname Janet states that a true ecosystem consist of plants, animals, human beings, spirits (land and water). The tree commonly found in build up area, the *Ogriki or Ogrisi* has a conspicuous position. While providing a balance in the ecosystem, its leaves serve as traditional eye drop while the tree symbolizes reverence for and presence of Gods in the compound... nature.

Ubrurhe (1998) notes that totems common Urhobo - the plants have greatly supported the production of traditional medicines. The grove where they are found, serves to host religious activities. Such activities include: rituals, ceremonies, prayers and sacrificial altars are offered there. The Sacredness of the place enhances the growth and cultivation of certain plants and the abode of other animals and totems as the environment is protected from encroachment and hardly besieged or consumed by wild fire caused by bush burning.

The wanton consumption and over dependence on plants and animals by man have made most species of animal to come to extinction. The *Ogborigbo* which is regarded as a totem among the Orogun was a native Central America but today, it is no longer common among the people as it is considered as a common reptile. Also, the *Obokari* and *Oghre*, totems among the Avwraka people have gradually disappeared from many urban centres of the clan. The influx of strangers has come to bear on them both in the lakes, ponds, rivers and the bushes as a result cultural infiltration. The presence of totems however, are greatly preserved at the grove around the ponds dedicated to the deity *OVWUVWE* at Otorho Avwraka (Isiorhovoja G.O Interview).

In Nigeria, the issue of ecological and environmental degradation has been a reoccurring decimal. According to the latest report of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development, land degradation, deforestation, air and water pollution still witness low level of attention as both human and capital development are greatly needed.

These policies and programmes however, can be complemented with emphasis on traditional religious practices where emphasis already has been laid on preservation and care for nature. This can boost the investment of the Federal Government Ecological Fund established in 1981, as part of the efforts geared towards nature care. Unfortunately, the natural theological perspective of man assuming the rightful place of consumption without care are based on the wrong interpretation of some texts; it has also faulted the huge investment. Mr. Odey, who is the Minister of Environment and Chairman, National Committee on Ecological Problems, decried the lack of transparency and commitment to the execution of such projects. Thus, *Operation Noah* has been adopted by some nations to encourage stewardship of nature.

And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every sort into the ark, to keep them alive with you; they shall be male and female. Of the birds according to

*their kinds, and of the animals according to their kinds,
of every creeping thing of the ground according to its
kind, two of every sort shall come in to you, to keep
them alive. (Gen. 6:19-20 RSV)*

The mind of the Creator is here revealed just before the flood, which plague the whole earth – all living things both plants and animals alike. This Noahic example, serve as antecedent to traditional religionist among the Urhobo who draw inspiration from the works of the Almighty. They are conscious of the Creator in their religious practices as noted by Mbiti (1991), who attests to the fact that, *the people take their religion with them and in them*. Our attitude to nature should stem naturally from our response to the Creator, who beholds his creation and derives pleasure from them.

Berube (1971) in his response to nature care adopts a humanist ecological approach to nature conservation. He simply sees it as “earth household” or “housekeeping on earth.” Some of the points motioned include:

*The organization of all living things into an ecosystem,
a community of mutual dependence and support. All
living things should therefore acknowledge the privilege
of being a part of the system and not lord with each
species maintaining its own niche. The wider the niche
spectrum, the more life opportunity each species has;
the more stable the ecosystem; ... it becomes stable if it
includes a larger variety of species. A stable ecosystem
preserves its balanced web of relationship from most
natural threats.*

It becomes evident, that true act of nature stewardship does not leave room for a vacuum to be created. Any change in one part affects the other directly. This is the reason why some species of totems are very common in areas where they are significantly honoured and become scarce in places where they are daily hunted. This brings to mind the decentralized location of man depending on verities of species for survival yet none depends on him directly. Since all of man’s activities are carried out within the environment, nature demands that we should be steward and be prudent managers of the environment.

Ironically, the derogatory name given to ATR which is practiced in diverse communities as *Animism* (Imasogie 1982), took a different dimension in the field of Sciences as *Ecology*. It shows the relationship between man and his environment as well as the interplay which has resulted in a balance of the system. In this new dimension, nature care which was perceived as animism became known as ecology that has gained wider acceptability among scholars and diverse religious adherents who ordinarily who not have discovered the glory of the Supreme Being in nature. Man now sees the need to interact with his environment favourably without exploiting and abuse.

CONCLUSION

The paper examines totemism in Urhobo Traditional context. It discovers that man in his natural state cannot be separated from his religious affiliation even in the wake of Christianity. Totems which in a sense speak for other traditional practices like: grove serves some sociological and economic function to the people among whom they are found. They are the rallying points among clans and polity

However, the advent of science and technology as well as Western Religious Traditions like Christianity and Islam has made people to think that ATR as practiced among the Urhobo is fetish, barbaric and paganistic. The Urhobo by location have unique experiences in their dealings with nature and as such, nature care became an important part of their religious life. “They believe that religion is relevant in all these areas of their life”

The over dependence on science and technology has not proffered solution to man’s need for intimacy with the Supreme Being rather, it has compounded the situation through economic activities, destroying totems, groves and other forms of religious symbols. However, the Urhobo traditional context still perceive this fundamental ideas of ATR hence grove, totems, artifacts are revered greatly with natural phenomena seen from one community to the other. They have devotees who daily attend to them in some communities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The paper seeks to recommend among other things that:

- a. Our traditional practices should not be traded off because of nascent technology, science and or religious teachings that are capable of robbing us of our common symbol of identity.
- b. The religions of man made it possible for him to associate with different objects which can rightly be classified as totems- animals and plants or natural phenomena.
- c. The world has discovered that several species have come to extinction today, yet they exist in certain parts or location as totems. Operation Noah should be adopted to rescue them from total extinction.
- d. We are stewards of nature – whether we adopt ecological or animistic views. The environment will lend its support as long as man becomes a prudent manager and not a cheater.
- e. The government should encourage the preservation of species from community to community. The production of ATR medicines are bye-products of grove and other sacred places. Therefore, fund should be made available through all tiers of the government to ensure their conservation.

REFERENCES

Arthur,C.L and Myer, J.E (1985) *Magic, Witchcraft And Religions*, London: Mayfield Publishing Company, p.26

Berube, A (1973) “Protecting Our Environment: Making Peace with Man and Nature in Life in America Pollution Poverty Power and Fear,” *The Regents University of Colorado Dallas*: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, p.78

Ehrlich, P.R and Ehrlich, A.E (1993) “Why have we Let Our Environment Deteriorate” in *The Regents University of Colorado*, Dallas: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, p.78

Ekeh, P.P (2005) “A Profile of Urhobo Culture” in (ed) Ekeh, P.P (2005) *Studies in Urhobo Culture*, New York: Urhobo Historical Society, p.1

Eriwo, S.U (1991) *African Traditional Religion and Christianity in Nigeria: The Urhobo People*, Benin City: Ambik Press, pp.2-3

Imasogie, O (1982) *African Traditional Religion*, Ibadan: University Press, p.17.

Isiorhovoja, U.O., Okobia, F. N and Bubu, A.G (2011) “Rethinking Marxist Ideology: The Urhobo Experience” *Continental Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 3 (1) p.15

Onigu, O (2005) “Totemism in Orogun, Midwestern Nigeria” in (ed) Ekeh, P.P (2005) *Studies in Urhobo Culture*, New York: Urhobo Historical Society, p.279

Odeh, H “Ecological Fund: Trapped in the Web of Endless Controversy” *The Punch*, Saturday 14, 2010, p.28

Mbiti, J.S (1991) *Introduction to African Religion*, Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, pp.18-19

Ninian, S.(1989) *The World's Religions*, Cambridge: Cambridge Press, pp.35,417

Parrinder, G. (1961) *West African Religion*, London: Eperworth Press, p.7

Radcliffe-Brown, A.R (1952) “The Sociological Theory of Totems” in *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, London: Doubleday Press, p.125

Ray, B (1999) *African Religions: Symbol, Ritual and Community*, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, p.xi

“Totems” *Handbook to The World's Religion*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, p.140

Ubrurhe, J.O (1989) African Traditional Medicine, Benin City: Ethiope Publishing, 56.

INTERVIEWS

Pastor F.Okoro, 36 years old, Clergy, was interviewed at Igun on 02-04-11.

Rev.O. D. Ugbede, 58 years old, clergy, was interviewed at Ughelli, on 08-04-11.

Elder G.O. Isiorhovoja, 69 years old, Community Leader, was interviewed at Erho on 19-04-11.

Papa Ago Coffy 67 years old, Community Leader, was interviewed at Ugon-Orogun on 23-04-11.

Mrs. Uyovwievovwe Betty 30 years old, Librarian, was interviewed at Ekete-Warri on 26-04-11.

Rev. Ivwori, G. 40 years old, Lecturer, was interviewed at gbarho on 04-05-11.

Mr. Oniovosa Stanley 32 years old, Economist, was interviewed at Okpe on 06-05-11.

Mrs. Akpojotor 65 years old, Community Leader, was interviewed at Etuwewe, Warri on the 06-06-2010.

Mdm Osefiemure B 62 years old, Igbe Priestess, was interviewed at Kokori on 12-03-11

Received for Publication: 16/07/2011

Accepted for Publication: 30/09/2011

Corresponding author

Isiorhovoja, Uyovwievovwe Osbert

Delta State University, Abraka

E-mail:isiorhovojaosbert@ovi.com